

THE SOCIAL USE OF CATALAN

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The latest official figures regarding the extent of familiarity with and use of the Catalan language in the *Principat de Catalunya* (Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona) have been described as "very positive" by all the cultural, civic and political groups concerned with the linguistic problem. These figures come from the 1985 census and take into account all the inhabitants over the age of two, that is to say, almost six million people. The margin of error is therefore practically nil.

A few figures: 90 % of the population is familiar with Catalan, as opposed to 79 % five years ago. There has therefore been an increase of 11 %, quite a remarkable figure, especially if one compares it with the situation of other languages in Europe or around the world. 64 % of the population of the *Principat* habitually speaks Catalan. There are no reliable statistics available to compare with this but it is in itself an encouraging figure. In any case, we can say that in the last few years there has been an important increase in the social and collective use of the language, even amongst those groups whose cultural origins tend to isolate them. This increase is even more remarkable if we compare it with the situation of other European languages spoken in countries without a state of their own, where the general tendency is one of recession or, at best, of no change. For example, there is the case of the Basque Country, where the

Basque language is spoken by about 24 % of the population, or Wales, where 19 % of the population speak Welsh. These two are the most hopeful cases in Europe, Irish and Breton being practically extinct, at least as regards everyday use.

The statistics referring to Catalan do not include figures for the *País Valencià*, the Balearics or Catalonia North (in France). In the *País Valencià* and the Balearic Isles, the indications regarding everyday use of the language are encouraging, since in both cases more than 50 % of the population speak Catalan. The problem is that Catalan has not yet managed to break out of the closed family circle and reach any degree of social and cultural prestige, which the experts say is what saves a language. On the other hand, in Catalonia North the situation is one of recession and Catalan is not even used within the family circle.

To what do we owe the phenomenon that has taken place in the *Principat*? Basically, there is one principal factor and three subsequent causes. The principal factor has been the recuperation of our autonomy and the unity of all the political forces in promoting the return of Catalan as the language of the country.

As a result of this, a national television channel has appeared with daily broadcasts of a normal duration and popular and competitive programmes; the teaching of Catalan has been made compulsory in all the schools of Catalo-

nia, thus bringing the language into the lives of boys and girls who otherwise would have no contact with it, and all the local and autonomic authorities have joined in a campaign in favour of Catalan signs and notices in shops, public buildings, etc.

All this activity has begun to have an effect, as the results of the poll show. The combined pressure of all the aspects mentioned above have begun to create the idea that unless one understands, speaks, reads and writes Catalan, one is not an educated person, capable of being integrated in society at all its different levels. Although we have not yet reached our target, we are well on the way.

It must be pointed out, and the sociolinguists have already done so, that the whole process has been normal and easy, with practically no conflicts due to language. Catalan-speakers have retained their language and the majority of Castilian-speakers have understood the advantages of linguistic integration. Naturally, there are Castilian-speaking concentrations which, for cultural and, especially, economic reasons, it is very difficult to penetrate. But these people's children and grandchildren are already viewing the phenomenon with more capacity to integrate. The goal of a society 100 % able to understand, speak, read and write Catalan is still a distant one. But sociolinguists—at least the majority—say that the path taken is the right one. ■